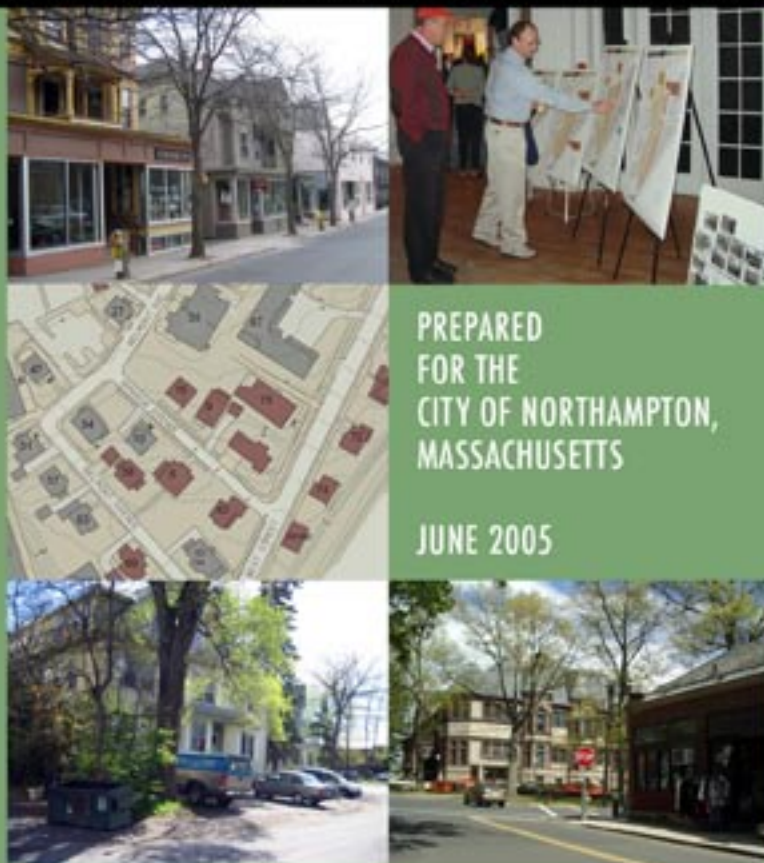




# *The Future of West Street*

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WEST STREET CORRIDOR/NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN



PREPARED  
FOR THE  
CITY OF NORTHAMPTON,  
MASSACHUSETTS

JUNE 2005

GOODY  
CLANCY

ARCHITECTURE  
PLANNING  
PRESERVATION



# *The Future of West Street*

COMMUNITY WORKSHOP AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WEST STREET CORRIDOR/NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN

REPORT PREPARED FOR THE CITY OF NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Mary Clare Higgins, Mayor

Wayne Feiden, Director of Planning

JUNE 2005

GOODY  
CLANCY

ARCHITECTURE  
PLANNING  
PRESERVATION





## CONTENTS

	<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>GENESIS AND SCOPE OF THE PROJECT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>II</b>	<b>THE CHARACTER OF THE STUDY AREA</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>III</b>	<b>PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE STUDY AREA AND MITIGATION</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>IV</b>	<b>PREVIOUS PLANNING PROCESS</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>V</b>	<b>THE COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>VI</b>	<b>GOODY CLANCY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>28</b>
	<b>APPENDIX: ANALYSIS OF COMMERCIAL LOCATIONS IN THE WEST STREET CORRIDOR STUDY AREA</b>	<b>35</b>



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Northampton contracted with Goody Clancy, a Boston planning and architecture firm, to organize a public workshop focused on the future character of the West Street/Green Street Corridor. This workshop and the recommendations resulting from it will constitute the first step toward a plan for this part of the City. The need for such a plan has become clear for two reasons: 1) the area is the focus of a contentious debate about the Smith College proposal for a new engineering and sciences center on residential and commercial property that it has acquired over the years, and 2) West Street will be the major link between downtown and new development approximately one mile away at the Village at Hospital Hill. The contentiousness of the debate over Smith's expansion plans reflects a complex environment that includes high expectations for community input on significant development projects that affect the community, Northampton's success and correspondingly tight housing market, and Smith's commitment to creating an exceptional engineering and science program for women. The study area currently contains a mixture of uses, including approximately 260 residents and a commercial area on Green Street, and over the years Smith College has obtained ownership of more than half of the properties in the area.

The community workshop held on May 21, 2005, and attended by 122 people was designed to be a forum for public discussion, but it was not intended to be a referendum on any specific idea or proposal. The purpose of this event was to bring more voices into the discussion, open new space for consideration of alternative possibilities based on scenarios prepared by the consultants, and begin to look at the college expansion project in the somewhat wider context of West Street as an important corridor linking downtown with the new development area at Hospital Hill. For some participants, the workshop was an opportunity to learn more about the issues and they did not express strong views. Some participants saw it as a chance to express long-held opinions and try to convince others. Most of the workshop discussions focused on the following issues:

- Siting variations for Smith engineering and science buildings
- Commercial locations and associated issues
- Importance of the residential neighborhood
- Importance of the Smith engineering and sciences expansion project
- Process

## GOODY CLANCY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations in this report are not intended to offer a particular answer to how development should occur in the West Street Corridor study area. Rather, they provide a framework for the parties to consider alternatives that include a variety of potential compromises and structure a more transparent process that demonstrates openness to public participation.

Two big questions underlie this planning study: 1) What is the future character and extent of the Smith campus, particularly as it meets the City? 2) What should be the future character of West Street in the study area?

## **WHERE THE CAMPUS MEETS THE CITY**

Smith has a traditional campus model of buildings within a matrix of green open space. On the core campus, buildings tend to face inward. Where the campus has expanded into the City, the College has tended to acquire property to create contiguous ownership. Some may see expansion as currently conceptualized as sacrificing resources important to the community in order to preserve the traditional campus design model. The one type of street edge that did not come up as a preference in the workshop was a more campus-like West Street edge.

## **THE CHARACTER OF WEST STREET**

What should West Street be like? Should West Street become more “urban” in character and if so, can the Smith expansion plans contribute to that change in character? Workshop participants were not united on the type of development character they might like to see on West Street, except for a general preference that it be a place that be walkable, safe for pedestrians, have green elements such as street trees and landscaping, and that it have “people activity.” These are typical characteristics of urban streets. Some were more comfortable with the current residential scale and massing of most buildings along the street, while others seemed open to other options.

## **PROCESS**

Given the limited success of the Working Group process and the difficulties encountered in the workshop situation, it is important to take a close look at the next steps in the planning process and the overall structure of communications among the College, the City and the community at large.

- **Engage in a structured process with public input to advance to the next stage in the planning study with a clear understanding of specific questions and trade-offs to be studied, evaluated, and negotiated.**
- **Encourage Smith to be more definitive and specific in communications with the City and the public as a way to dispel rumors and misunderstandings of the College’s goals.**
- **Institutionalize communications in a public context between Smith College and the City, for example in annual meetings with the City Council or Planning Board**
- **Improve College informational outreach to the community on the College website.**



## **PLANNING DIRECTIONS**

In the discussion about the West Street Corridor study area, the stakeholder groups have tended to base their approaches on a traditional model that they understand and wish to preserve. Everyone has a stake in understanding the pros and cons of a broader range of models.

- **Create principles for the town/gown edge that reflect a permeable and mixed-use condition.**
- **Create design principles for West Street with buildings oriented to the street, active ground floors, wider sidewalks, street trees, and other elements to create a pedestrian-friendly environment.**
- **Consider alternative siting options for the Smith engineering and science complex including construction on parking lots, more underground space, and urban-style building on the West Street edge.**
- **Evaluate commercial cluster alternatives based on market assessment as well as the potential of building alternatives.**
- **Consider opportunities for preserving a permanent residential enclave or commit to definitive long-term strategies for no net loss of housing and affordability protections.**

# I GENESIS AND SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

The City of Northampton contracted with Goody Clancy, a Boston planning and architecture firm, to organize a public workshop focused on the future character of the West Street/Green Street Corridor. This workshop and the recommendations resulting from it will constitute the first step towards a plan for this part of the City. The need for such a plan has become clear for two reasons: 1) The area is the focus of a contentious debate about the proposal of Smith College to build a new engineering and sciences center on residential and commercial property that it has acquired over the years, and 2) West Street will be the major link between downtown and new development approximately one mile away at the Village at Hospital Hill.

In 2004, Mayor Mary Clare Higgins convened a working group made up of 16 stakeholders representing the College, area residents and businesses, affordable housing advocates, elected officials, and City staff. The purpose of the working group was to assist the City and Smith in its discussions about the future character of this part of the City. Although the Working Group was able to reach agreement on general goals and principles, the stakeholders' interpretations of how to achieve the goals and implement the principles diverged significantly.

The College agreed to provide funds to the City to contract with a consultant for this first step in creating a plan for the West Street/Green Street Corridor. The workshop had three major purposes:

- Identify a range of workable uses and design options for the corridor
- Identify elements of a process to create more predictability for the future
- Begin the West Street Corridor/Neighborhood Plan

This report contains the consultants' analysis of the study area, the previous process, and the stakeholders' interests; a description and analysis of the workshop; and recommendations for next steps. The consultants' recommendations are based on data provided by the Northampton Planning Department, interviews with stakeholders, workshop results and on-site observations.

## II THE CHARACTER OF THE STUDY AREA

The West Street Corridor/Green Street Study area encompasses both sides of West Street from downtown Northampton to the river and includes Green Street, Belmont Avenue, Arnold Avenue and Ahwaga Avenue. It is located along the southeastern edge of the Smith College campus. The orthophoto below (Exhibit 1) shows the boundaries of the study area.



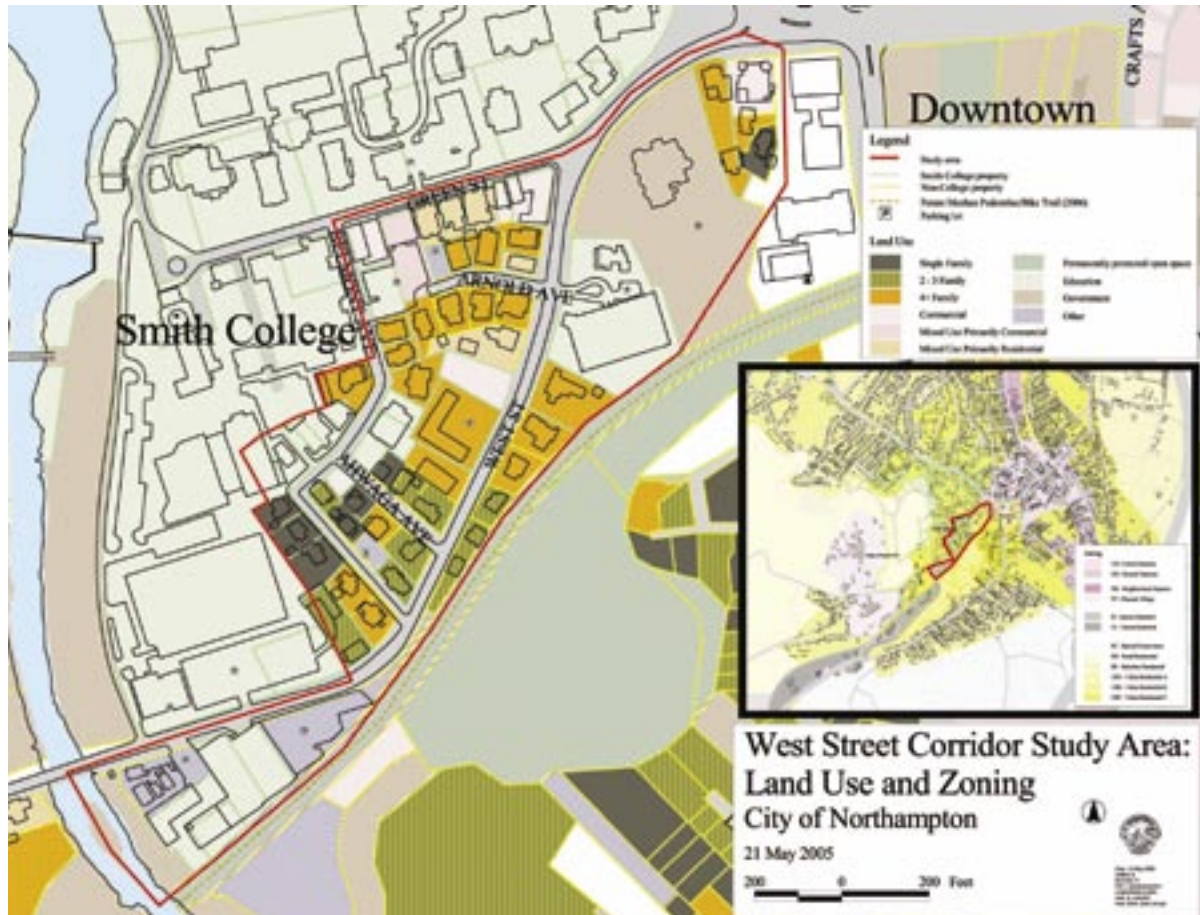
*Exhibit 1  
West Street  
Corridor Study*

### LAND USE AND ZONING

The study area has a mixture of uses, with commercial or mixed-use buildings along Green Street and the West Street corner near Green Street. Residential uses predominate elsewhere in the study area except for several parcels or buildings used by Smith for offices or parking; the city library; and office uses in the Felt Building, a former mill. Except for the Green Street commercial area, including the West Street corner, which is zoned Neighborhood Business, the area is zoned Urban Residential C, the City's densest residential zone. (Please see Exhibit 2, "Land Use and Zoning Map.")

**Exhibit 2**  
**Land Use and**  
**Zoning Map**

Most of the 216 housing units are located in 29 multifamily buildings, 19 of which have four or more units. There are seven single-family homes in the study area (one of which is located in the rear of a West Street property east of the library). An additional fifteen housing units are SRO (single-room occupancy) units owned and managed by a nonprofit organization that will soon move its tenants and office space to another location.



## LAND OWNERSHIP

Over the years, Smith College has purchased properties on Northampton streets where major Smith buildings are located (see Exhibit 3 on the facing page). This pattern can be seen on Henshaw Avenue, Prospect Street and Bedford Terrace. In the study area, the College has been acquiring properties on Green Street, Belmont Street, Ahwaga Avenue and West Avenue. Currently, Smith owns 39 of the 72 lots within the study area boundaries. The College owns four of the seven single-family homes and 84 of 206 apartments. All but one of the commercial or mixed-use properties along Green Street are owned or will soon be owned by Smith.



## RESIDENTIAL POPULATION

Based on the 2000 census, we can estimate the population at approximately 260 residents. This results in an average household size of 1.2 persons per unit, which is consistent with reports that many of the apartments are occupied by one person. Some of the residents have lived in the area for more than five years. However, it was also reported that the area overall has a relatively transient population, with many residents staying there for only one or two years.

## COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY AND BUSINESS VIABILITY

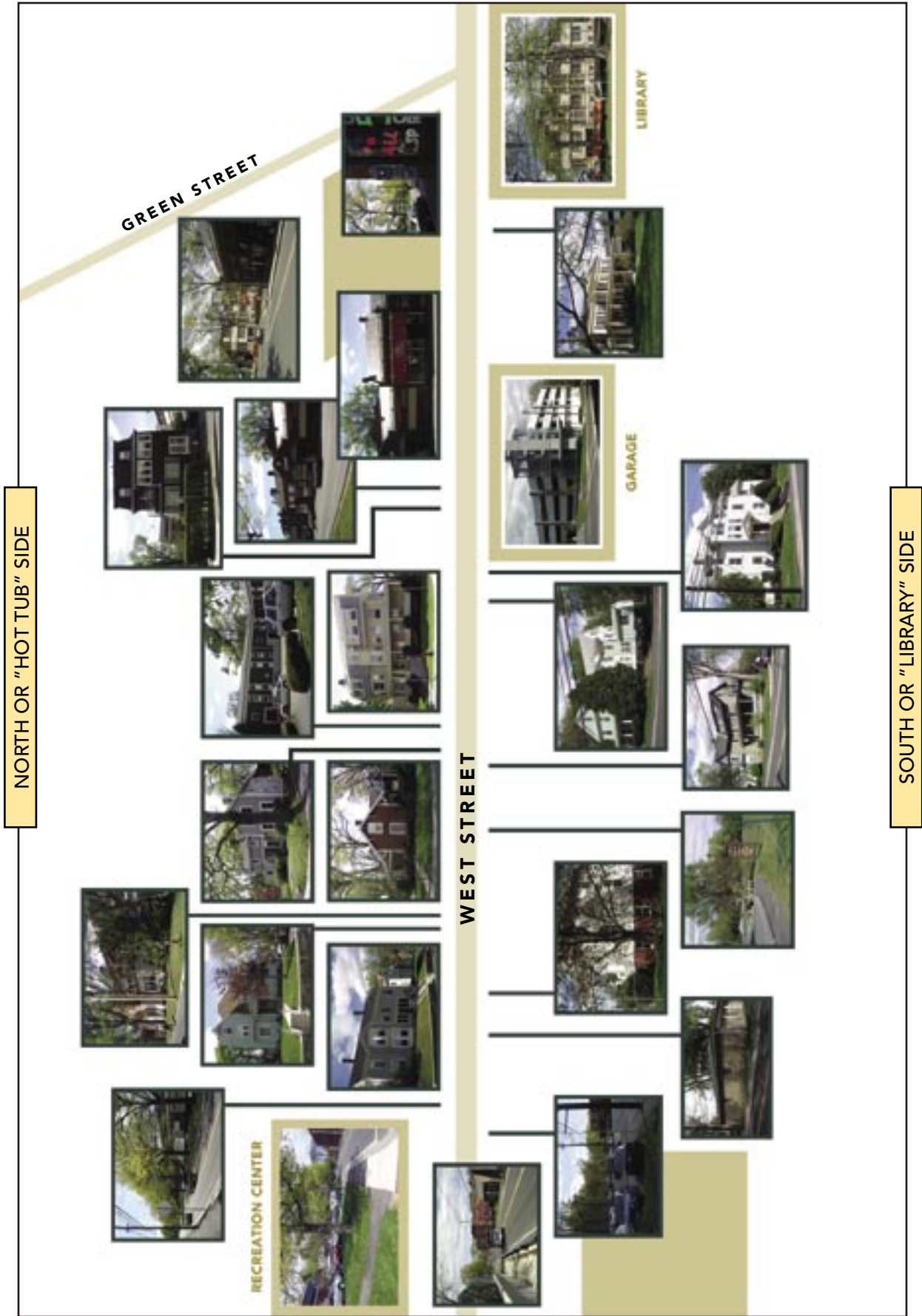
Historically, the commercial area was tightly connected to the market provided by Smith College students and at one time was known for fashionable dress shops. When the Smith College bookstore and a post office occupied the building at the corner of Green Street and Belmont Avenue, many students and others were drawn daily to the Green Street commercial district. Since the book store and post office moved to the new student center, which is more centrally located on campus, business activity has declined significantly. Rents are lower than in downtown Northampton.

Merchants also said that there is a perception that the Green Street commercial area has limited parking, which deters people from coming there. However, several businesses, such as the Green Street Café and East Heaven Hot Tubs are destinations that customers and clients continue to seek out because they have established a regional reputation.



Farther down West Street, the Felt Building, a redeveloped mill, has about 100 employees. One of those employees stated that some people from the Felt Building will walk to Green Street for lunch or to patronize other businesses, but most go downtown. Smith also owns part of the mill complex, where the Physical Plant Department is located. A Mass Electric substation is located south of the Felt Building by the river.

**Exhibit 3**  
*Smith College owns many properties (shown in gray) in the study area.*



## URBAN DESIGN CONDITIONS

The area as a whole has an eclectic character with predominantly wood-frame residential buildings of no more than three stories, one- to two-story commercial or mixed-use buildings and a few unique, larger-scale structures, including the public library, the college parking garage, an L-shaped apartment building on West Street, the college athletic center and the Felt Building.

### > *North (“Hot Tub”) side of West Street*

At its intersection with Elm Street downtown, West Street rises slightly and curves toward Green Street. The Green Street intersection is not visible from downtown. Between Elm and Green Streets, on the campus side of West Street, three red-brick College buildings are elevated above the street with lawn setbacks. These buildings are oriented toward the interior of Smith’s campus. Between Green Street and Arnold Avenue, there are three brick commercial structures built to the sidewalk and two frame houses containing apartments that have front setbacks, in one case paved over for parking. Further along West Street, from Arnold Avenue to the college athletic center, large houses containing apartments give the street a traditional residential character. Most of these houses are sited with similar front setbacks from the street and at higher elevations than the sidewalk, with steps up to the front door. The only residential building that does not fit this character is the L-shaped, boxy apartment building with a parking lot in front.

### > *South (“Library”) side of West Street*

Between Elm Street and the Smith parking garage, this side of West Street has a variable character. The study area begins with a frame residential building owned by Smith with a planted front setback. Next to this building is the large city library, set back quite far from the street with a number of trees on the front lawn. Another residential-style building, used as offices by Smith, is the next building. Also set back quite far from the street, the house has two distinctive trees in front. The parking garage is set an angle to the street in order to disguise its mass, which is much larger than surrounding buildings. As the street descends towards the Felt Building and the river, the remainder of the buildings are houses containing multiple units with standard lawn setbacks from the street. Along this side of the street there is an abrupt drop in elevation behind the library parking lot, the garage and the adjacent houses and the lots are increasingly constrained in size from the garage to the Felt Building. A railroad right of way passes at the bottom of this drop and is planned for use as a pedestrian and bicycle trail.

> **Green Street**

Green Street is a “single-loaded” shopping street on the south, with Smith College parking lots, green space and buildings across the street to the north. Built to the property line in most cases, the commercial buildings are close together, in some cases with party walls, but they are somewhat different in design style and materials, providing variety in character along the street.

*(Left photo) College parking lots are located on the north side of Green Street.  
(Right photo) The south side of Green Street has a variety of commercial buildings.*



> **Arnold Avenue**

From its intersection with West Street, this street is flanked by large houses with multiple housing units and parking lots. The lots are paved for parking, without sidewalks or lawns. The lack of distinct boundaries to the street gives the entire area the appearance of a large parking lot, especially at the end of Arnold Avenue, where several large parking lots nearly merge together behind Green Street buildings and on Belmont Avenue.

*Pavement and parking areas on Arnold Avenue.*



> **Belmont and Ahwaga Avenues**

The part of Belmont Avenue closest to Green Street has blank walls on each side: the high, brick blank walls of the performing arts center and the one-story blank side wall of the former college bookstore. Beyond the bookstore is a parking lot. Further along the street, conditions are marked by the presence of large multifamily buildings or Smith offices in residential-style buildings set in paved lots and college parking lots until the street takes a 90-degree turn toward West Street.

*Blank walls and a parking lot at the Belmont Avenue/Green Street intersection.*







Ahwaga Avenue and the portion of Belmont Avenue parallel to Ahwaga have a more typical residential character. Residential buildings ranging from single family houses to buildings with four or more units are set in landscaped lots. Mature trees give the streets a verdant feel. The only anomaly is the use of an unbuilt lot on Belmont Avenue as an unpaved parking area for a building fronting on Ahwaga Avenue.

*Photos above: Traditional residential character on lower Belmont and Ahwaga Avenues. At left, a Belmont Avenue apartment building surrounded by College buildings and parking lots.*

### III PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE STUDY AREA AND MITIGATION

#### EXPANDED ENGINEERING AND SCIENCES FACILITIES

Smith College has filed a proposal with the Planning Board for a 136,000 square-foot laboratory building ("Building A") to be located along Green Street and Belmont Avenue on the present site of a pizzeria, the vacant former college bookstore and post office, a parking lot, and four residential buildings owned by Smith containing 26 apartments. The College plans to build two more science and engineering buildings, each of approximately the same size, in an as-yet undefined future. The total new development would be approximately 400,000 square feet. The concepts advanced informally so far would create an academic precinct with green open space in the location of Green Street. This would replace Green Street and its commercial area, including the commercial buildings at the corner of Green and West Streets and an undefined number of housing units. The locations of Buildings B and C are generally indicated on Smith's conceptual plans as being along West Street.

#### PROPOSED MITIGATION FOR DISLOCATION OF RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES

The College has agreed to replace the 26 housing units to be demolished for the construction of Building A with housing units near downtown. The College established a \$3 million fund to help create affordable housing units and identified



*The footprints of Building A and the buildings it would replace are shown above.*

36 Bedford Terrace, currently occupied by Smith affiliates in 19 apartments, and the adjacent parking lot as college property near downtown to be offered to developers for redevelopment into community housing. The majority of that housing will be affordable to households with incomes at or below 80% of the Northampton area median income. Because 36 Bedford Terrace is currently not part of the city's inventory of housing available to the population at large, the transfer of this building with 26 housing units would result in no net loss of housing as a result of the construction of Building A.

Since announcing its plans for Building A, the College has offered relocation assistance to residents of the four buildings to be demolished. The type and amount of assistance has not been publicly specified in detail. Some tenants have accepted Smith assistance and moved to other locations. Residents dislocated by the con-



*Bedford Terrace and the abutting parking lot will be redeveloped to replace housing lost to construction of Building A.*

struction of Building A who wish to live at 36 Bedford Terrace will be offered units there regardless of income. It is not clear at present, however, whether Bedford Terrace units will be available before demolition of the residential buildings.

The College is acquiring 66 Green Street, which is owned by HER, Inc., and includes 15 SRO apartments over the Green Street Café. In exchange for this property, Smith will provide HER with 16 SRO units at 180-182 Earle Street and relocate tenants who wish to move there. This transaction will make Smith the owner of all but one property on Green Street. The College has pledged to honor the current lease of the Green Street Café.

*Bedford Terrace is adjacent to neighborhood retail and a few blocks from downtown.*

The College has stated it will negotiate relocation of any displaced businesses on a case-by-case basis. Construction of Building A will affect only one existing business. The buildings that formerly housed the college bookstore and the post office, however, will be demolished, reducing the amount of available commercial space in the study area.



## IV PREVIOUS PLANNING PROCESS: THE GREEN STREET/SMITH COLLEGE AD HOC WORKING GROUP

Mayor Mary Clare Higgins convened the Ad Hoc Working Group in 2004, and it met eight times from April to July. The information available to the group included a conceptual plan of short- and long-term expansion, preliminary design plans for Building A and general information on the College's plan for replacement of housing units to be demolished for construction of Building A. The Working Group focused much of its discussion on design principles and impact mitigation related to Building A. A draft report was circulated for review and comment, and three more meetings were held from December 2004 to March 2005. The final report described areas of agreement and disagreement.

The major goals on which there was agreement include:

- *Smith to build an engineering and science complex totaling approximately 400,000 square feet.* Participants expressed their support in general for Smith's expanded engineering and science program and their understanding of the importance of Smith's success for the City of Northampton.

AD HOC WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP	
Smith College administration	3
Smith College students (student association representative)	1
Green Street area residents (Coalition for Affordable Northampton Neighborhoods—CANN)	3
Green Street businesses	2
Affordable housing advocates (Smith/Northampton Affordable Housing Partnership—SNAP; Northampton Housing Partnership—NHP)	2
City Council	1
Planning Board	1
Planning Department	2
Mayor's Office	1

- *No net loss of housing units within walking distance of downtown, especially for affordable units.* The increasing price of housing in Northampton has made the community very sensitive to the potential loss of any housing units, and especially housing with modest rents. The West Street/Green Street area has been a traditional location for affordable, market rate housing.
- *Relocation assistance and the opportunity to be relocated within walking distance of downtown for existing tenants.* Proximity to downtown is one of the advantages of the West Street/Green Street area and provides the potential opportunity for residents there to live without a car. A strong downtown, reduction in traffic and promotion of transportation alternatives are policy objectives of the City. Tenants who are involuntarily dislocated from their homes must be provided with relocation assistance and, if desired, a location that is comparable in access to downtown.
- *New construction to be developed comprehensively and in relation to citywide planning goals.* The planning study initiated with this report is intended to create a framework for any new construction in the area that takes citywide goals into account.
- *Changes to the area to respect the maintenance of an active, mixed-use and diverse neighborhood accessible to and from the campus.* The study area should continue to include nonacademic uses.



- *Nonacademic mixed-use development to be consistent with market demand.* Market considerations will be among the criteria evaluated in discussions about appropriate mixed-use development in this area.

The Working Group Report also identified a set of priority design principles on which there was general agreement:

- Incorporate smart growth principles.
- Minimize the impact of expansion on neighborhood uses.
- Make West Street a vibrant, mixed-use area with commercial, residential, and college uses.
- Ensure integration of the new science and engineering buildings into the surrounding area.
- Ensure adequate parking and pedestrian safety.
- Integrate building and landscape design with the campus, streetscape, and neighborhood.
- Create and publicize a plan for construction mitigation.

## **ASSUMPTIONS, CONCERNS AND DISAGREEMENTS**

Although the parties participating in the Working Group agreed on goals and principles, there were significant differences in interpretation of how to achieve the goals and apply the principles. As could be expected, each group tended to interpret the goals and principles in light of its own objectives and give less attention to the needs of the other groups. The Working Group's report and the consultants' subsequent interviews with representatives of the stakeholder groups who participated in the Working Group process demonstrated that each group was operating from somewhat different assumptions about the future character of the study area.

- ***Smith College***

In its response to the Working Group recommendations dated January 7, 2005, Smith conveyed a vision of an expanded campus in the northern half of the area bounded by West and Green Streets and Belmont Avenue.

- > **Location and size of the proposed new academic precinct.** The proposed location of the new engineering and science buildings makes sense to the College not only because Smith has acquired property in the West Street/Green Street area but because that location is near existing science and engineering buildings. Smith has made a commitment to science and engineering education for women. In order to fulfill that commitment, the College needs new academic facilities that will provide the up to date science and engineering labs needed for a competitive program. Because so much teaching and research in the sciences today is interdisciplinary, colleges and universities seek to create an environment of adjacent facilities in which faculty and students in different disciplines work can easily collaborate. To members of the college community, the success of the new programs and facilities will benefit not only the college but also the wider Northampton community.

- > **The campus model.** Although there are a few isolated college facilities, the physical character of the Smith campus follows a model of contiguous properties interspersed with green open space. Even though public roads cross or enter the campus in locations such as Elm, Bedford, Prospect and Henshaw Streets, Smith has acquired adjacent properties along these streets to create a series of properties in contiguous Smith ownership. The campus is open to the public and remains a resource for the Northampton community and in that sense it is a permeable campus. However, major buildings on the historic campus tend to face inward rather than toward the street and the campus model still assumes that there is defined and recognizable edge between the campus and the community.
- > **Future character of West Street and Green Street.** In the West Street corridor study area Smith appears to have been following its previous practice of acquiring properties adjacent to the campus. In the Working Group Report Smith suggested that the south side of West Street would be appropriate for a mixed-use commercial/residential cluster to “create a border of commercial and residential space similar to the borders of many campuses (and similar to Green Street in its older, more commercially active days).” Similarly, the College clearly envisions Green Street as an academic precinct. However, Smith also stated a willingness to discuss the creation of a mixed-use environment in the buildings it owns that would not be affected by the science complex. These are all either residential or currently used for Smith offices. These statements suggest a somewhat ambiguous sense that West Street is viewed in the long term as a natural border for the Smith campus.
- > **Approach to design principles.** Smith’s approach to the design principles enunciated in the Working Group process has tended to focus on the expression of these principles in relation to the campus and LEED green building objectives rather than in relation to the community.
- **Resident Group (CANN)**
  - > **Housing preservation the primary goal.** CANN’s primary goal is to preserve all the existing housing units in the study area. During the Working Group meetings, CANN suggested siting Building A along Green Street with ground floor commercial space in order to preserve housing. During the Working Group process, CANN also put forward some concepts for new mixed-use development along West Street that would include housing. If demolition goes forward, however, the group seeks a requirement that lost housing units be replaced before the existing 26 units are demolished.
  - > **Approach to design principles.** CANN representatives focused on the difference in scale between Building A and the existing residential buildings and the need to ensure appropriate transitions between large buildings and smaller-

scale buildings. To some degree, however, the disjunction between large institutional buildings and residential-scale buildings is already a feature of the neighborhood, especially along Belmont Avenue. CANN representatives also stated that it was not possible, in their view, to assess the extent to which Building A would be consistent with the design principles as whole without more information on future plans.

- > **Future character of West and Green streets.** CANN supported the preservation of retail activities at the corner of West and Green Streets and, as noted above, suggested ground floor retail in a reoriented science building along Green Street.

- ***Business Owners***

The primary concern of business owners is with the viability of their businesses. They would, of course, prefer not to have to move. However, it is clear from all reports that the absence of the regular stream of students who used to come to Green Street to the bookstore and post office has resulted in an overall decline in business. Merchants also attribute business weakness to a lack of visible parking. This implies that the Green Street commercial area does not effectively function as a part of downtown, where the City has provided substantial parking to support downtown businesses.

The College states that business owners who became tenants in recent years were informed at the time of leasing that the College planned to turn the Green Street area into an academic precinct at some point in the future. The College has not been explicit about the kind of relocation assistance it would be willing to provide to business owners, though it has stated a willingness to negotiate on a case by case basis.

Uncertainty of various types is a source of concern to the business owners. Many say that the Building A proposal has led many customers to believe that the Green Street commercial district is already closed. Uncertainty about Smith's timetable for further expansion and about the level of support that can be expected for relocation expenses is another source of concern.

- ***The City***

Northampton, like all municipalities, is concerned when the expansion of a nonprofit educational institution will take property off the tax rolls, whether the loss is of residential or commercial tax revenue. Like the neighborhood representatives in CANN, the City was concerned about loss of housing units, but City officials' focus was on the problem of overall loss of affordable, market rate rental housing close to downtown. Smith's provision of relocation assistance to displaced tenants and its commitment to redevelopment of 36 Bedford Terrace

has been accepted by the City as a reasonable response to the future loss of units in college-owned property caused by the construction of Building A. The City also wanted to guarantee that displaced residential and business tenants would receive relocation assistance.

The other issue of major concern to the City has been its desire to avoid losing all the commercial presence on West Street, preferably at the Green Street intersection. Since appropriate locations for commercial space are not limitless, the City wants to retain its existing commercial space. In addition, the City would like to see West Street function as an attractive, mixed-use corridor from the new development at the Village at the Hospital Hill to downtown.

## V THE COMMUNITY WORKSHOP



*Participants view scenario exhibits.*

The community workshop was designed to be a forum for public discussion of the difficult issues that had emerged through the Ad Hoc Working Group process. It was not intended to be a referendum on any specific idea or proposal. Given the contentious atmosphere that had built up around these issues, the purpose of this event was to bring more voices into the discussion, open space for consideration of alternative possibilities, and begin

to look at the college expansion project in the somewhat wider context of West Street as an important corridor linking downtown with the new development area at Hospital Hill. For some participants, the workshop was an opportunity to learn more about the issues and they did not express strong views. Some participants saw it as a chance to express their long-held opinions and try to convince others. Because this is only the beginning of a planning process for the whole West Street Corridor/Green Street Area, it was not expected that this event would result in a definitive planning direction.

### DESCRIPTION

The community workshop was held on Saturday, May 21, 2005, between 8:30 AM and 12:30 PM at the Community Arts Center. Approximately 122 persons attended. Exhibits for review before the workshop, while participants were getting refreshments, included a color aerial photo of the study area, a land-use and zoning map, views of the proposed Smith building as it would fit into the study area, and scenarios prepared by the consultant team for discussion.





*Reports on the discussions in the breakout groups.*

After a welcome and preliminary remarks by Mayor Higgins, the consultants gave a short presentation on existing conditions in the study area intended to raise questions about the preferred character of West Street and to offer a set of scenarios to spark discussion. Three breakout groups were then formed to talk about the urban design character of the West Street Corridor and issues raised by the scenarios. Because the number of attendees was greater than expected, the breakout groups were larger than anticipated. Participants were asked to reconvene twice during the morning to report on the discussions in the breakout groups. Following a short reconvening of the group as a whole to report on the results of the urban design discussion, Mayor Higgins took the opportunity to reiterate some of her previous remarks on the relationship of the City, College and community in working out the complexities of this process. At the end of the workshop another reconvening of the group took place to report back on the discussions about the scenario issues.

## URBAN DESIGN ISSUES

Streetscape and building elements together create the character of a corridor like West Street. The design and arrangement of these elements communicates whether a street is urban, suburban or rural, whether it is welcoming to pedestrians, and what kinds of activities might be expected on the street.

In a medium-density urban context like West Street, the streetscape elements to be considered include the sidewalk, street trees, the size and treatment of setbacks to buildings, treatment of property lines (no definition, fences, etc.), and the number, size and impact of curb cuts to allow the entrance of vehicles. The buildings along a street influence the character of people's experience of that street by their size, type (for example, residential, commercial, or institutional, which tend to have distinct characteristics), materials, the kind of use on the ground floor, the design of the ground floor, and where the entrance is located.

Changes in these variables will affect what West Street looks like, whether pedestrians will feel comfortable there, how much activity there will be on the street, and also how it will be perceived by drivers going through the neighborhood on West Street. Workshop participants' views and preferences of what the experience of West Street should be like can inform decisions about potential changes to existing buildings and how any future college buildings should be sited and designed.

## URBAN DESIGN DISCUSSION

This was the first agenda item in the breakout groups, and some participants found it difficult to focus on these issues because of their desire to make sure that their overall views on the Smith expansion project were heard. All the groups did, however, make progress in identifying the urban design aspects of West Street that were important to them.

### *West Street Design Character*

Participants expressed a variety of views on West Street, but tended to be united in a desire for a pedestrian-friendly street:

- West Street could have a wide, more “rural” character, or feel more enclosed and then open into downtown at Elm Street.
- Curb cuts for commercial uses make sidewalks on West Street feel less safe for walkers and runners.
- The West Street edge should be envisioned as a permeable edge to the campus, not a barrier.
- Future traffic associated with Hospital Hill should not be allowed to threaten the pedestrian character of West Street. Public transportation options such as a shuttle should be considered.
- The street should have a pedestrian-friendly, tree-lined character.
- West Street needs more green, better lighting, and traffic calming.
- Traffic and speeding on West Street are concerns.

The City took out 30 parking spaces on the north side of West Street that had contributed to a greater sense of pedestrian safety and traffic calming.

- West Street should be green and leafy.
- The scale and relationships of the residential buildings should be kept along the street.
- West Street must be walkable and feel safe.
- Moving Building A elsewhere is not a solution, but a matter of transferring the problem. Focus on preserving the character of the West Street corridor.



*New academic buildings can be designed to complement older residential buildings.*

## SCENARIOS

Four scenarios developed by the consultants were presented as a way to spark discussion among the workshop participants. The scenarios were not intended to be definitive or exhaustive but rather to help participants imagine several different ways in which residential, college and commercial uses could be arranged within the study area. The scenarios as presented assumed that the College would move forward with Building A as proposed and would propose construction of additional academic buildings in this area in the future.

> ***Scenario 1: Campus edge on Hot Tub side/commercial edge on Library side***

This scenario takes up the implications of some of the College's statements in the Working Group Report by positing that the campus edge would extend to West Street and that commercial activity would move to the other side of the street. Most of the uses on the Hot Tub side would be institutional. Under this scenario, the Library side of West Street would be rezoned to allow and promote commercial uses and the College properties on that side of the street (probably excluding the garage) would be sold and redeveloped as commercial.

> ***Scenario 2: Mixed-use edge on Hot Tub side***

This scenario suggests that existing and new buildings along the West Street edge would be designed to provide a mixture of uses. Green Street would be closed and behind this mixed-use edge there would be primarily campus uses. One of the science buildings could be designed with an urban edge on West Street to accommodate ground floor retail.

*Ground-floor retail can be incorporated into lab buildings.*



> ***Scenario 3: Mixed-use corner at Green/West and retail node at the garage***

This scenario consolidates the commercial uses at the corner of Green and West Streets and on the location of the Smith-owned building just southwest of the parking garage.

The concept here is that there would be a multistory building on West Street at the corner of Green that would include retail uses on the ground floor and other uses above (potentially institutional or residential). Another possibility would be to build around the existing brick buildings, incorporating them or their facades into a new building.

The property next to the College garage is on one of the larger parcels available on that side of the street. The existing building could be replaced with a commercial building designed to screen some of the bulk of the parking garage.

> ***Scenario 4: Academic construction in parking lots on north side of Green Street***

In this scenario most of the West Street edge would not be expected to change very much. New College construction would be pushed back towards the existing campus, with use of the parking lots on the north side of Green Street for construction of one of the proposed engineering and science buildings.



## SCENARIOS DISCUSSION

The discussions in the breakout groups did not take the form of sequenced attention to each of the scenarios. Many participants were anxious to make their views known on topics such as the retention of the residential neighborhood or the importance to Smith of the new engineering and science facilities. However, there was considerable discussion of how different land uses could be arranged within the study area and the relative importance of these land uses. The discussions can be broken down into several categories:

- Siting variations for the Smith buildings (including the scenarios)
- Commercial locations and associated issues
- General design character
- Importance of the residential area to the residents and to Northampton
- General design issues
- Parking and transportation
- Open space
- The library
- Process

## SITING VARIATIONS FOR SMITH ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE BUILDINGS

There was a wide disparity of opinions and no consensus among participants on the most suitable locations for the new Smith buildings. Views expressed included:

- Scenario 2, with mixed-use edge and the College behind it, would be a good approach.
- Scenario 1 would involve considerable new purchases by Smith.
- Scenario 4, building on the Green Street parking lot and expanding on the north side of Green Street, is a good idea.
- Build on the intersection of Green Street and College Lane (where the round-about is).
- Smith can grow in an “arc,” from the parking lot north of Green Street to Building A as sited to the vacant parcel on north side of West near the L-shaped building, across West Street to what’s labeled as the “commercial pocket” at no. 54.
- Approaches that involve higher density development could allow more of the desired mix of uses to be accommodated on the site.
- Build taller on smaller footprints.
- Tear down Garrison Hall (the building owned by Smith just northeast of the parking garage) and build a tower for the science building as a way to avoid displacing residents.
- Be cautious about building towers, because towers breed more towers.
- Leave the West Street Corridor as is and build a science campus at the Village at Hospital Hill instead of at Green Street. Hospital Hill needs an “engine,” and Smith might be it.



## COMMERCIAL LOCATIONS AND ASSOCIATED ISSUES

The discussion about the retention of retail and commercial uses in the West Street Corridor showed considerable support for the benefits of retail from an urban character point of view because it brings life and activity to an area. On the other hand, many people wondered how strong the market in this area is now and whether Hospital Hill development will make a difference in that viability. Many participants were unwilling to express a preference until it was proven that their preference was viable from a market or development perspective

- In Scenario 3, the commercial zone on the south side near the library could be a good connector to downtown.
- Green Street is an attractive commercial street and should be strengthened not closed. It provides good access through the campus to the river. While Green Street is not as strong commercially as it once was, this weakening is a result of actions by the College (relocation of bookstore, etc.). These actions have made the College more “introverted”.
- Green Street would not be viable for retail if it were closed. Retail uses would need to be relocated to West Street.
- Green Street should be kept open for pedestrians and possibly for vehicles, even if the area becomes part of the campus.
- This area needs to be considered a “12-month and after-five [PM] neighborhood” with real vitality in all seasons and times of the day. It is important to have people in the area all year and at all times of day.
- Is new commercial development on West Street really viable? It may be more feasible to maintain what’s there than reinvent it.
- There is support for expansion of retail or mixed-use development in principle, but it is preferable to preserve existing uses and then look at expansion if it is viable.
- Establish mixed-use zoning everywhere so that commercial uses can emerge where they are viable.
- Don’t follow the Mt. Holyoke model of creating a gentrified commercial district.
- If there is commercial development, it should be occupied by independent businesses.
- Find out what commercial businesses are needed in the neighborhood.
- How will Hospital Hill affect businesses here?
- Hospital Hill will influence the extent of mixed use on West Street.
- Share resources (energy, etc.) between university buildings and retail.
- The City is concerned about losing any commercial space and any nonresidential tax base.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD

In all the groups, current residents of the study area were strongly in favor of retaining residential character and preserving existing housing units. Many of the comments focused on the general value of the housing and the residential population in the area, rather than specific ideas about how College and residential interests could

be balanced. Some participants who do not live in the neighborhood expressed sympathy with the residents' position. Others voiced concerns about trends against housing affordability in Northampton and potential real estate pressures on lower-cost housing in the study area.

- Neighborhood preservation should be the highest priority; it's a nice place to live and should be maintained in its current condition.
- Preservation involves more than buildings: it includes the social elements that make up a neighborhood.
- This is a "naturally occurring" affordable housing neighborhood and it is important to retain affordable residential areas.
- Residents want to keep neighborhood as it is.
- Some residents don't want to have to move to a building with subsidized affordable units.
- Many residents of the neighborhood work in social services at modest salaries and benefit the community. Others are artists who also contribute to the community.
- Create more housing, for example rebuild and redevelop housing at the L-shaped building on West Avenue and the adjacent lot where a house burned down.
- Affordability within the existing neighborhood is precarious. There are no protections in place for privately owned rental units in the neighborhood. They might easily be converted to condos and the affordability would be lost.

## **IMPORTANCE OF THE SMITH ENGINEERING AND SCIENCES EXPANSION PROJECT**

Workshop participants who spoke to explain the value of the College's expansion plans tended to focus on the overall importance of the new buildings to Smith's programs, why the Hospital Hill location would not be suitable, and the ways that the expansion project could benefit the Northampton community in general. There were also comments from people who live outside the study area expressing simultaneous support for Smith's need to expand and support for the value of continuing some residential and commercial presence in the area.

- Smith needs to expand its facilities in order to remain competitive and support its engineering and science programs for women.
- The expanded programs will also benefit the community as a whole through Smith's work with local school systems and other outreach activities.
- The engineering and sciences buildings cannot function well if split among multiple sites (as would be the case if they were located at Hospital Hill). Students and faculty need to be able to move from one facility to another several times over the course of the day. Smith's program is not the kind of program that can become an economic engine for startup businesses at Hospital Hill.

## **PARKING AND TRANSPORTATION**

Some participants were concerned about providing sufficient parking in the area and also about how West Street will function with new development at Hospital Hill.

- The parking implications of economic development schemes must be considered.
- Convenient parking is an issue for residents and the College.
- Bicycles need to be a part of the thinking on West Street.
- The signal at the downtown end of West Street is problematic.
- The railroad right of way now planned to be a bicycle and pedestrian path should be made into a vehicle route connecting with downtown, particularly in light of future traffic from Hospital Hill
- Consider the impact of any new buildings on the streets leading into West Street.

## **LIBRARY AND OPEN SPACE**

The presence in this planning area of both the city library and an important open space facility was highlighted by several participants.

- The library is an important facility and should not become isolated from housing and retail uses.
- There may be opportunities to connect the neighborhood across the tracks to the east with linkages to open space.
- The open space behind the library should be considered and integrated into plan

## **GENERAL DESIGN CHARACTER**

Participants also expressed views about the general character of the area and potential changes.

- Concern was raised about historic preservation, and its place in the plan. Does the College have a “goal” for preservation? Preservation should be “integral” to any plan. Site challenges on Library side of West Street, such as the grade changes, suggest that preservation there would be appropriate, especially given the public green edge. (No other specific preservation sites were identified.)
- Since land is limited, think of mid-rise development, with green roofs and uses over retail. Height can be used to reduce footprints.
- Respect the scale of building in the neighborhood.
- Community access to Smith has been great and coexistence with a residential neighborhood should be encouraged.
- All city neighborhoods used to be mixed-use like this one is today, but this characteristic is being lost as development occurs across the city.
- The future character of Belmont Avenue is important. The current plan places loading docks on this side of proposed Building A.



- Smith buildings need to be better contributors to the social life of the community, via public spaces/mixed-use/museum.
- Smith might take down a couple of ugly dorms on/near Elm and build the science precinct there.
- Why have this emphasis on West Street, when State Street is a strategic area to think about in terms of retail/housing and proximity to downtown?

## PROCESS

Comments on the process ranged from appreciation and suggestions for strengthening it to cynicism about the potential influence of community views.

- Use the City's 2020 Vision as a general framework for specific planning efforts.
- Focus on "tools" to influence Smith's site-planning process.
- The planning process isn't effective because of the late start of community input.
- It is important to strengthen and institutionalize the public process.
- It is important to have inclusive meetings/forums and the opportunity to hear multiple voices in this workshop was appreciated.
- Beyond input, the community needs to feel it has or will have real influence.
- Involve Smith trustees directly in the process.
- People need to know more about the character of proposed Smith buildings.
- The corridor needs to be planned comprehensively.
- Use new technology to foster interaction between town and gown.
- The process is not open or fair and the ideas expressed by neighborhood residents will not be acted upon.

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

This workshop was the first opportunity for public discussion of plans for the West Street Corridor study area. It was not possible, however, for it to function like a typical visioning workshop that normally kicks off public participation in a neighborhood planning study. Many participants came to the workshop with established positions about the Smith expansion plans and hoped for validation for their positions from the workshop discussions. Others were becoming familiar with the issues and were not yet ready to commit themselves to a particular point of view. Many struggled with a desire to support Smith, which they saw as being an important part of the Northampton community and generally a good neighbor, and their attachment to the West Street/Green Street area as a traditional transition area between the College and the community.

## VI GOODY CLANCY RECOMMENDATIONS

The planning dilemmas facing all of the stakeholders in the West Street Corridor study area, as well as the Northampton community as a whole, reflect the difficulties of attaining multiple positive goals in one location. The contentiousness of the debate over Smith's expansion plans also reflects a complex environment that includes high expectations for community input on significant development projects that affect the community, Northampton's success and correspondingly tight housing market, and Smith's commitment to creating an exceptional engineering and science program for women. Each of the major parties involved in the debate over the future character of the West Street study area has made efforts to work toward a resolution of some of the issues involved.

Smith's acquisition of many properties in the study area was open and clearly intended for the ultimate benefit of the College, giving it the option to use them for college purposes. As the discussions about expansion plans developed, the College made a very significant commitment to replacing the housing units that would be lost in construction of Building A by contributing a college-owned building and parking lot that will now go back into the community inventory of housing units. Moreover, through negotiations with affordable housing organizations and the City, the College committed \$3 million to ensure that a majority of the housing units created will be permanently affordable, in contrast to the housing currently in the study area, which is susceptible to rent increases and potential redevelopment. By these actions, which should be recognized, Smith not only guaranteed that dislocated tenants would have the option of living in newly renovated apartments close to downtown and a neighborhood commercial area, but it also added permanently affordable housing to the City.

It is natural that residents of the study area who have lived there for a number of years are not happy about what they see as forced moves and a significant change in their immediate neighborhood. From their point of view, they tried to engage with the College and the City to seriously consider alternatives that could preserve more existing housing. Unfortunately, the College's reluctance to make definitive statements about how the availability of this housing would be linked to demolition of the buildings in the study area fostered suspicion among some that the College will not fully honor its commitment.

The recommendations here are not intended to offer a particular answer to how development should occur in the West Street Corridor study area. Rather, they provide a framework for the parties to consider alternatives that include a variety of potential compromises and structure a more transparent process that demonstrates openness to public participation.

## PLANNING AGENDA

Two big questions underlie this planning study: 1) What is the future character and extent of the Smith campus, particularly as it meets the City? 2) What is the future character of West Street?

### WHERE THE CAMPUS MEETS THE CITY

As noted earlier, Smith has a traditional campus model of buildings within a matrix of green open space. On the core campus, buildings tend to face inward. Where the campus has expanded into the City, the College has tended to acquire property to create contiguous ownership. The West Street/Green Street area has clearly been identified as the remaining logical expansion area for the campus. The conceptual plans that Smith has discussed for the three-building engineering and science complex conform to the traditional campus model. The College has reportedly expressed reluctance to intensify development within the existing campus because of a desire to retain the maximum amount of campus open space.

Some may see the current expansion concepts as sacrificing resources important to the community in order to preserve the traditional campus design model. The workshop discussions suggested a preference for a different approach along West Street. Over time, Smith will continue to need to renovate and expand facilities, and further expansion into the city may not be feasible for a number of reasons. The current debate is an opportunity to explore design alternatives and options that may result in a more urban edge to the campus or a somewhat greater intensity of development within the core campus than traditionally preferred. The successful urban character of downtown Northampton contributes to the attractiveness of Smith as a college, just as Smith's presence is important to the City. The West Street Corridor Plan can be the laboratory to work out these relationships and create new understandings to shape town-gown relations in the future.

### THE CHARACTER OF WEST STREET

What should West Street be like? Should West Street become more “urban” in character and if so, can the Smith expansion plans contribute to that change in character? Workshop participants were not united on the type of development character they might like to see on West Street except for a general preference that it be a place that is walkable, safe for pedestrians, contain green elements such as street trees and landscaping, and that it have “people activity.” These are typical characteristics of urban streets. Some were more comfortable with the current residential scale and massing of most buildings along the street, while others seemed open to other options. The one type of street edge that did not come up as a preference was a more campus-like West Street edge, similar to the existing campus edge on West Street between Green and Elm.

West Street as it is today gives many cues that it is intended to be primarily a vehicle route between downtown and other parts of the City. The commercial corner at West and Green Streets has limited effect in challenging this overall perception, although it does make that side of the street more attractive for pedestrians. Lack of parallel parking and street trees combined with the wide setbacks at the library and Garrison Hall, the large presence of the college parking garage, and the way that many of the residential buildings on the Hot Tub side are set above the sidewalk level all contribute to this vehicle-oriented character.

There are a number of ways that a more urban, people-oriented West Street could be created on the Hot Tub side of the street. The potential market to support retail all along West Street in the study area is limited, given the proximity of downtown. However, the combination of residents with the potential market of the students and faculty that would be working in and around the engineering and science complex could support satellite retail and services for this population as well as destination businesses with regional visibility. In addition, West Street could become an overflow location for offices unable to locate in downtown due to cost or other reasons.

## PROCESS

Given the limited success of the Working Group process and the difficulties encountered in the workshop situation, it is important to take a close look at the next steps in the planning process and the overall structure of communications among the College, the City and the community at large. Communities and institutions that share neighborhoods are increasingly finding that regular, structured communication fosters better understanding and results in more successful development.

- **Engage in a structured process with public input to advance to the next stage in the planning study**

The City should lead a scoping process to identify the elements of the West Street Corridor Planning Study, including opportunities for public input, in order to develop a very clear understanding of the time horizon the plan is expected to address, the questions that will be answered, the range of trade-offs that will be considered, the way alternatives will be evaluated, and the measures of progress. Realistically, it is unlikely that a complete “win-win” situation for all parties will emerge, so the real costs and benefits (qualitative as well as quantitative) of trade-off decisions must become more salient to all. This process should include opportunities for participation by the Planning Board, elected officials, Smith College representatives empowered to speak for the College, residents of the study area and other parts of the city, business owners, and the public at large. The purpose is not

to redo the Working Group discussions, but to go beyond the generalities that were discussed in the Working Group to engage the kinds of questions suggested in the “Planning Directions” section that follows these recommendations on process.

- **Encourage Smith to be more definitive and specific in communications with the City and the public**

The College has a natural tendency to want to preserve flexibility. A reluctance to make definitive commitments about such things as relocation assistance, however, can fuel a climate of suspicion. In situations where involuntary displacement is proposed, the expectation today is that institutions will provide mitigation for that displacement. Clear and public statements can help dispel misunderstandings.

At the same time, when plans remain unclear or alternative courses of action are still under consideration, it is valuable for institutions to be as open as possible about their thinking, the goals they are trying to achieve, their understanding of how that might affect the wider community, why they believe they can or cannot pursue certain options, and so on. In the workshop discussions, participants would say things like, “I heard Smith said...” about various questions. More directness and clarity from the College itself, even if final decisions have not yet been made, tend to enhance the atmosphere for successful negotiation.

- **Institutionalize communications in a public context between Smith College and the City**

Informal communications between the College, the City and the community are no longer sufficient. The College’s expansion plans are occurring in a new context: the City has grown and become more sophisticated and the community expects to be involved in shaping the physical character of street corridors, neighborhoods and commercial areas. Even changes on campus that require no City action may still have impacts on the community. It is important to institutionalize communication in a public context that allows for public comment. This is valuable for all the parties as a way to identify potential questions or conflicts early and work to resolve them. The City and the College could work out a short list of questions for discussion in advance, so that both parties could be ready with data and information. Potential options to create this more formal communications program include:

- > Annual Meeting between Smith and the City Council to discuss issues of interest with allowance for public comment
- > Annual Meeting between Smith and the Planning Board to inform the Board of expected development activity or changes that could, for example, affect traffic volumes or patterns, with allowance for public comment.
- > When needed, regular updates for the Planning Board on planning and project progress.

- **Improve College informational outreach to the community**

Access to the College's information for residents on the Smith website needs improvement. For example, the College's home page contains no indication of where a community member might go to find information for Northampton residents. Many colleges and universities have a "Community" button that takes the visitor to pages about community programs, projects that affect the community, and so on. Currently, it can be difficult to find the pages with information on Building A and future plans. It is in the College's interest to make it easy for community members to find out about issues such as the affordable housing fund and construction mitigation and to provide for e-mail and telephone contact.

## **PLANNING DIRECTIONS**

In the discussion about the West Street Corridor study area, the stakeholder groups have tended to base their approaches on a traditional model that they understand and wish to preserve. Smith is thinking about its educational mission and preserving its traditional campus character. The residents are thinking about the value of their "naturally-occurring" affordable neighborhood convenient to downtown, providing housing at modest costs both to long-time residents and to people who need housing in transitional moments of their lives. The City wants to make sure that a commercial district whose prosperity has waxed and waned does not disappear just when new development down the road may create additional support for a near-downtown satellite retail cluster. Though all the stakeholder groups are formally committed to a "mixed-use" future for the West Street Corridor study area, according to the Working Group report, the College prefers that the mixture occur in properties for which it is not responsible; the residents want the mixture to be the responsibility of the College.

The planning study should take a broad view of the future of the West Street Corridor study area, investigating how to accommodate Smith's very real expansion needs while creating a corridor that might be even more successful than what exists now. The plan should not focus solely on what Smith should do but should also include potential actions by other entities—for example, housing developers and the City. What follows is a series of suggested options and alternatives for inclusion and evaluation in the next stages of the West Street Corridor/Neighborhood Plan process.

- **Create principles for the town/gown edge**

- > Analyze the way that the Smith campus meets the town at different locations and ask Smith to explain its objectives for the physical character of its campus, the principles it is applying in its expansion plans and how they are related to the college's sense of community and educational mission.

- > Create principles for appropriate transitions between college uses and residential uses, across streets and across property lines.
- > Consider negotiating a line that provides for some campus expansion into the community up to a limit beyond which the College will not seek to create institutional uses.

- **Consider the following design principles for West Street**

- > Buildings should be oriented to the street.
- > Building design should contribute to a pedestrian-friendly ground-floor environment (i.e., with windows, welcoming doorways, articulated facades, etc.)
- > Building alternatives should explore options that include:
  - Massing and scale facing the street that is similar to the existing residential scale through use of stepped up facades, bays and courtyards, and other design options
  - More urban-style facades built near the sidewalk edge that include ground floors with active uses.
- > To the degree possible, widen sidewalks and provide street trees.

- **Smith engineering and science complex**

A number of options could be explored to meet Smith's needs while providing more flexibility in the West Street Corridor study area:

- > Explore the potential to build on the Green Street parking lot, possibly connecting to existing engineering and science buildings.
- > Explore the potential to build in the area of the Smith parking lots south of the performing arts center on Belmont Avenue.
- > Explore the potential to build more floors of the buildings underground while reducing the above-ground footprint. An example of this approach can be seen in the 135,000 sf Harvard Laboratory for Integrated Science and Engineering now under construction which has about 45,000 sf above ground in 5 stories and 3 levels underground with some daylighting to the underground space.
- > Explore the potential to build an urban-style building to the street edge on West Street with provision for retail activity at the Green Street corner.

- **Commercial clusters**

Except for a possible retail cluster location near the parking garage, the library side of West Street is not particularly suitable for retail because of small lots and lack of visibility. Even if mixed-use zoning were to be established along both sides of West Street from downtown to the river, it is unlikely that this would trigger a substantial conversion of residential to commercial uses along West Street. The most suitable location for commercial uses in this area will continue to be a cluster at the West/Green corner. Issues for exploration include:

- > Consider obtaining a market assessment for retail and services in the West Street Corridor for existing uses and in light of potential changes, including new student and faculty activity and Hospital Hill development.

- > Avoid removal of the West/Green retail corner by pursuing building alternatives that will allow for retaining the corner buildings.
- > Provide for ground-floor retail fronting on West Street in at least a part of new academic construction with an agreement to pay property tax on the portion of the building in commercial use.
- > Guarantee dislocated businesses a minimum level of relocation assistance with additional assistance to be negotiated on a case by case basis.
- > Negotiate a payment from Smith to the City to mitigate any lost commercial tax base.

- **Residential community**

Smith owns a significant amount of the residential property in the West Street study area. It has transformed some of it into office uses and can reserve it for Smith affiliates, if it wishes to, without any need to notify the City. The current expansion concept would leave a rather small residential enclave amid large institutional buildings. As Smith is doing in the case of Building A, it should make relocation assistance available to displaced tenants and work with the City to avoid net loss of housing units. Potential futures to be explored that include retention of housing in the area should include:

- > Pending acquisition by Smith, the College and the City could work out a plan (through housing programs) to provide nonprofit housing developers with assistance to build mixed-income (and if feasible, mixed-use) housing along the West Street Corridor. This would relocate the housing on Arnold Avenue that the College's conceptual plans would require to be removed. Arnold Avenue residents would be offered relocation assistance and the option of relocating to the new housing. This would assume that additional engineering and science space would be built farther back from West Street.
- > Smith could commit to purchase no more property on lower Belmont Avenue or Ahwaga Street and to keep residential properties that it owns south of the L-shaped apartment house on West Street in residential use. There could be a provision that, with tenant turnover, Smith could reserve these residential uses for Smith affiliates.

Successful navigation of the difficult choices facing the City, the College, and the community in the West Street Corridor planning area will require a commitment to exploring new options in a context of regular public communication. A structured, sequential process of evaluating alternatives based on the needs, values, and criteria of all the stakeholders will help reveal where options are truly realistic. The future of West Street will emerge from a negotiation process focused on the detailed opportunities and trade-offs that those alternatives offer to the College, City, and community.



## **APPENDIX**

# **ANALYSIS OF COMMERCIAL LOCATIONS IN THE WEST STREET CORRIDOR STUDY AREA**

Although close to downtown, the success of the Green Street/West Street commercial district has historically depended on a close market relationship with the Smith College community on the adjacent campus. During periods in the past, Green Street was thriving even when downtown had many retail vacancies. At one time it was elegant dress shops that attracted Smith students. Then they came to the college book store and post office. Today, when Northampton's downtown is a recognized success story, the West Street/Green Street area has lost these anchor establishments, and the future of its commercial uses is under discussion.

As part of the community workshop project in preparation for a West Street Corridor Plan, Goody Clancy was asked to analyze the commercial viability of locations within the study area, taking into account the proposed expansion of Smith academic buildings and future development approximately a mile away at Hospital Hill. This analysis is based on observations of site conditions, information provided by the Northampton Planning Department and others, and current trends in development for consumer retail and services. It is not based on a market study. Green Street and both sides of West Street within the study area were evaluated.

### **CURRENT TRENDS**

Retailing today is tremendously competitive and shoppers can choose among big boxes, suburban strips, lifestyle centers, catalogs and the Internet, as well as downtowns and neighborhood shopping districts. Northampton has had extraordinary success in revitalizing its downtown as a regional center of pedestrian-friendly Main Street retail, restaurants, entertainment and services. Several arterials that lead into downtown, such as Route 5, are shopping corridors with a more suburban, car-oriented character. In addition there are a handful of small retail clusters in neighborhoods close to downtown that have neither the intensity of downtown nor the car-friendly convenience and wide visibility of strip retail on the arterials. The West/Green Street area is one of them.

The Urban Land Institute has described successful neighborhood retail districts as "convenient, service-oriented, pedestrian-scaled, and connected to the urban lifestyles of the neighborhood's residents." <sup>1</sup> They typically are surrounded by customers living in dense neighborhoods. The districts are highly visible, easy to get to, and provide sufficient, user-friendly parking. Retail footprints for independent retailers generally range from 2,000 to 5,000 square feet, and small retailers need to be clustered near an anchor, destination business, or densely populated area.

The West Street/Green Street area has a significantly smaller residential population than is typical of a successful neighborhood retail district, which is usually supported by at least 2,000–3,000 residents. In effect, the area is a hybrid, partially supported by College/neighborhood activity and partially serving as an overflow area for the downtown market. Consequently, its success as a neighborhood retail cluster close to downtown is dependent on accommodating a mix of uses that either serve immediate residents and College affiliates or attract regional customers to destination businesses.

Neighborhood shopping areas, such as the Green Street/West Street area, must also attract tenants by offering significantly lower rents than downtown, usually through use of space within existing structures. Development of newly constructed retail space in these districts is unlikely to be viable, given attainable rent levels. New construction has more potential on high-volume-traffic corridors or in downtown locations that provide the visibility strong retail businesses desire.

With respect to office uses, the West Street/Green Street area could potentially serve as a location for an expansion/accommodation of small-scale professional office space within existing structures, but again, achievable rents are not likely to support development costs associated with new construction.

## **POTENTIAL COMMERCIAL LOCATIONS IN THE WEST STREET CORRIDOR STUDY AREA**

The evaluation of retail locations in the West Street Corridor study area must take into account the number and distribution of people in the surrounding area and traffic volumes on West Street. With a population of approximately 260, the study area does not by itself have sufficient people to support even a convenience store. It is surrounded by Smith College on three sides and a ravine and public land on the fourth. Although the Village at Hospital Hill will have about 200 housing units, with a likely population of fewer than 500 people, not all of them will be close to West Street, and the Hospital Hill development is expected to include some retail and services. It is unlikely that a majority of Hospital Hill residents will travel a mile down West Street on foot to go shopping. West Street traffic averages about 10,000 daily trips, which limits somewhat its potential when compared to successful commercial corridors that attract retail development. Community desires to limit the growth of traffic on West Street further limit its potential as a retail corridor.

Specific locations on the corridor evaluated below include the south (Library) side of West Street and several locations on that side, the north (Hot Tub) side of West Street from the existing commercial corner south, and the West/Green corner.

## **SOUTH SIDE OF WEST STREET**

Significant physical barriers to commercial development on this side of West Street include the city's library, a large parcel with deep, landscaped setbacks that takes up a significant portion of the street frontage near downtown; the curve of the street itself, which impedes easy visibility for travelers from downtown; the lack of available land for development; and the small size of most of the developed parcels southwest of the garage. Even if all these small parcels were considered for redevelopment and assembled into one site for retail use, the abrupt drop in elevation behind these parcels makes this area extremely constrained and inefficient for building and associated parking.

The only parcels with some physical suitability for commercial uses are three Smith-owned parcels: 1) the parcel and buildings just to the east of the library; 2) Garrison Hall, just east of the garage; and 3) the parcel and residential building just southwest of the garage. The first site is close to the West/Elm intersection, on the fringe of downtown, and could conceivably be changed from residential to office use. Despite its location, it is not highly visible to pedestrians until they turn the corner from Elm Street, not easily accessible to cars, and faces college buildings oriented inward toward the campus across the street. The other two sites flank the Smith garage. Although physically they could be used/redeveloped for small-scale retail/office uses, it is not clear why a business would seek out these sites. They will always have less pedestrian traffic than the other side of the street. The sites are small, relatively isolated from other commercial activities and constrained for on-site parking.

## **WEST STREET SOUTHWEST OF ARNOLD AVENUE**

The West Street frontage on the "Hot Tub" side of the street southwest of Arnold Avenue could be rezoned for mixed-use that might eventually result in office uses of ground floors of some the buildings that are currently residential if, for example, space for professional offices became scarce in downtown. However, the residential character of existing buildings, together with grade changes from the sidewalk and a lack of suitable parking make these buildings generally unsuitable for accommodating retail users. Parcels along this side of the street are also not likely to meet the design and locational criteria for new retail construction based on topography, separation from downtown, and traffic volumes along the corridor.

## **GREEN STREET AND GREEN/WEST CORNER**

The current Green Street/West Street commercial buildings, including the former bookstore and post office, have a total footprint of approximately 35,000 square feet. Building A's site will use approximately one-third of that total. As noted earlier, Green Street's single-loaded businesses were traditionally oriented toward the College across the street. The corner of Green and West Streets, where businesses can attract the attention of pedestrians and cars going down West Street to and from downtown, remains the most suitable location for consumer retail and services. It

has the most visibility and is a known commercial location identified with several existing destination businesses. The proximity to Smith students and faculty would continue to provide customers. Ground-floor commercial uses extending to the parcels around Arnold Avenue could benefit from pedestrian traffic crossing from the college parking garage. The continued viability of this area as a retail location, however, will also depend on the availability of favorable rents in existing or new structures. Existing structures also have the potential to accommodate office users that do not require the visibility of a downtown location and seek more affordable rents.

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Beyard et al., *Ten Principles for Rebuilding Neighborhood Retail* (Washington, DC: ULI—The Urban Land Institute, 2003), 4.